

**Constructing Authority and Credibility:
Chinese Female Empowerment Influencers on RedNote**

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Abstract

As feminist discourse circulates on Chinese social media, it increasingly adapts to the constraints of social norms, algorithmic visibility, and platform censorship. In this context, a strand of female empowerment content has emerged on RedNote (Xiaohongshu). Rather than a radical departure, this represents an adaptive branch of feminist expression—emotionally resonant, strategically curated, and publicly palatable. This study defines and examines the emerging category of *female empowerment influencers*, investigating how they establish trust with audiences through narrative strategies, authority-building approaches, and how these efforts are perceived by viewers.

Employing a mixed-methods design, the research combines content analysis of 115 videos with in-depth interviews with three users who regularly engage with female empowerment-related content. The content analysis involved multidimensional coding of thematic content, authority-building approaches, and narrative strategies, followed by dimensionality reduction using Categorical Principal Components Analysis (CATPCA) and correlation analysis. Interviews contextualize these patterns by revealing how audiences interpret credibility and authenticity.

Findings suggest that digital authority and credibility is co-constructed through layered strategies. While authenticity is frequently used, audience trust is more consistently conferred when influencers demonstrate ideological coherence, contextual appropriateness, and alignment with perceived feminist values. The study further highlights that credibility is not merely a function of content or credentials but is shaped by platform affordances, socio-political norms, and relational dynamics. This research contributes to digital feminist media studies by refining the concept of authenticity labor and claiming the contingent and negotiated nature of trust in influencer culture. It also offers insight into how feminist influencers can more effectively cultivate credibility and authority by aligning their content with audience expectations and broader cultural imaginaries of empowerment.

KEYWORDS: Digital Feminism, Authenticity, Influencer Culture, Female Empowerment, Online Credibility and Authority

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1. Introduction

In China's changing digital environment, the rise of female empowerment influencers marks an important convergence of gender, media, and politics (The Paper, 2023; Women of China, 2023). These content creators employ social platforms like *RedNote* to confront existing gender norms, spread feminist dialogue, and explore the complex area of digital self-representation (Gu et al., 2024, p. 5325). In contrast to traditional lifestyle influencers, those focused on female empowerment emphasize significant topics such as gender equality, discrimination in the workplace, and bodily autonomy—often navigating an atmosphere marked by platform censorship and political limitations. Although these influencers are becoming more visible and impactful, there is still a scarcity of research analyzing them, and no recognized conceptual framework that delineates what a ‘female empowerment influencer’ entails in the Chinese digital landscape. This unclear definition requires a basic investigation to define the boundaries of this developing phenomenon, resulting in the initial research question:

RQ1: What characterizes a female empowerment influencer in the Chinese digital context?

Moreover, this thesis aims to tackle the significant knowledge gap concerning female empowerment influencers in the digital realm of China. In particular, this article aims to explore the intricate processes by which these individuals generate and sustain their credibility and authority in a context characterized by both opportunities and limitations. The trust that audience gain from influencers often rests on a delicate performance of authenticity and strategic self-promotion (Banet-Weiser, 2012, p. 219). In the case of feminist influencers in China, these tensions are further complicated by ideological commitments and national censorship to the topic of feminism (Hou, 2020, p. 337), further compelling them to balance commercial viability with socio-political engagement. These factors shape the following research questions:

RQ2: What strategies do female empowerment influencers use to build their authority and credibility?

RQ3: How do audiences perceive the authority and credibility of female empowerment influencers and what factors shape their trust and engagement?

This research aims to enhance the comprehension of modern digital feminism in China. Due to its increasing societal impact and broader presence in public discussions, this area deserves more academic focus. Through a thorough examination of the intersection between feminist discourse and influencer culture in an authoritarian media context, this research enhances the theoretical frameworks related to social media influencers, online feminism, and audience participation. From a practical perspective, studying the ways female empowerment influencers engage with and influence their audiences, sheds light on the function of digital platforms as contested arenas for feminist expression and social change within heavily regulated media contexts. By analyzing the interplay of digital advocacy influenced by ideological discipline and market demands, this study provides significant insights for both scholarly discussions and practical uses in the realm of digital activism.

Traditional understandings of authority and credibility have been reconfigured in the digital age, where non-institutional sources privileges credibility over conventional markers of reliability (Verboord et al., 2020, pp. 238; Koreman et al., 2024, p. 739), especially concerning female empowerment influencers on Chinese social media. Influencers build their credibility via authenticity, recognized expertise, and ongoing audience interaction (Audrezet et al., 2020, p. 559; Abidin, 2016, p. 87). Furthermore, as Banet-Weiser (2012, p. 57) and Han (2018, p. 738) discussed on branding and feminism in digital culture, female influencers operate at the crossroads of feminist dialogue, commercial imperatives, and platform governance. While these insights do not specifically examine female empowerment influencers, they do provide important theoretical grounding for understanding the tensions influencers navigate. The Chinese environment introduces further layers of complexity, as feminist dialogue must skillfully exercise through censorship systems while still tackling matters of gender equality and women's rights (Peng, 2018, p. 119).

To address the research questions, this thesis conducts a mixed-method approach. The research design incorporates quantitative content analysis of videos from selected female empowerment influencers on *RedNote* to identify key strategies, self-presentation techniques, and content patterns. In-depth interviews with audience members of female empowerment influencers provides valuable insights into audience perceptions and the various factors that influence their trust and engagement. This mixed method facilitates a comprehensive understanding of both the communicative strategies employed by influencers and the interpretive frameworks through which audiences engage with their content.

The thesis is structured as follows: following this introduction, Chapter 2 presents a comprehensive literature review situating this research within existing research on digital feminism in China, influencer culture, and digital credibility and authority. Chapter 3 draws the methodological approach, including sampling strategies, data collection procedures, and analytical techniques. Chapter 4 presents the empirical findings from both content analysis and in-depth interviews. Chapter 5 offers a critical discussion of these findings in relation to the literature review and research questions, concludes with implications for theory and practice, acknowledges limitations, and proposes directions for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1 Conceptualizing female empowerment influencers

In the digital age, social media platforms have facilitated the emergence of numerous influencers across global contexts. Influencers can be defined as individuals who monetize their content creation and cultivate substantial audience support on social media platforms (Alves De Castro et al., 2021). Research by Hasell and Chinn (2023) on lifestyle influencers demonstrates that these users not only inspire aspirational consumption but can also contribute to anti-expert attitudes and challenge conventional markers of authority (pp. 3-4). While scholarly examinations of Social Media Influencers (SMIs) have traditionally emphasized aesthetic and consumer-

related aspects, recent scholarship indicates a shift toward exploring how these digital personalities challenge conventional gender norms and catalyze social change (Petersson McIntyre, 2021, p. 1067-1069).

Nevertheless, within the Chinese context—particularly concerning the rising discourse on female empowerment (The Paper, 2023)—there exists a significant gap in academic understanding of how these influencers shape and are shaped by broader social, cultural, and political dynamics. While research on digital feminism and women's roles in online activism has expanded (Chen, 2020; Wang, 2022), limited focus has systematically investigated the specific characteristics and functions of *female empowerment influencers* in this unique context. Specifically, this paper aims to move beyond traditional conceptualizations of *influencer* that emphasize consumer culture or lifestyle branding, by examining the distinct ways in which these individuals negotiate gender norms, advocate for social change, and engage in politically sensitive conversations.

2.1.1 Defining influencers in digital culture

The term *influencer* refers to individuals who utilizes social media platforms to cultivate substantial followings, generate revenue from their content, and shape public opinion or consumer behaviors (Hudders et al., 2021, p. 327). Within academic discourse, these content creators are frequently categorized as Social Media Influencers (SMIs)—individuals who disseminate personal and lifestyle-related content, often integrated with *advertorials* or promotional materials (Abidin, 2015, p. 1). This commercial dimension distinguishes influencers from casual users; their capacity to convert visibility into economic capital underpins much of their digital engagement.

A related theoretical concept is that of micro-celebrity, which describes how ordinary individuals achieve popularity by employing strategic self-presentation techniques and sustained audience interaction (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Khamis et. al, 2017). Micro-celebrities deliberately craft their digital persona—utilizing aesthetic

curation, narrative consistency, and regular engagement—to cultivate a sense of intimacy and commitment among their followers (Abidin, 2016, p. 86).

Fundamentally, both influencers and micro-celebrities construct an online identity designed to gain attention from specific audiences, frequently blending authentic personal elements with promotional purpose (Brooks et al., 2021, p. 536).

While influencers often produce content centered on fashion, travel, food, or wellness, research increasingly demonstrates their capacity to operate at the intersection of personal branding, cultural discourse, and ideological influence (Abidin et al., 2020, p. 126). Contemporary influencers function as cultural intermediaries, brand ambassadors, and community leaders, often exerting influence that extends beyond consumption practices to shape attitudes toward significant societal issues (Hutchinson, 2017, pp. 6; Feijoo et al., 2024, p. 756; Tafesse & Wood, 2022, p. 415). This multifaceted role becomes particularly significant when examining influencers who explicitly engage with feminist discourse and women's empowerment.

2.1.2 Impact of the internet on Chinese feminism

Building on this understanding of influencers' potential societal impact, it is essential to examine the Chinese digital landscape, where the internet has fundamentally transformed social and political engagement, particularly through the emergence of digital feminism. Historically, discussions about women's rights in China were predominantly confined to formal institutional discourse or small activist collectives. However, with the proliferation of social media platforms—ranging from Weibo and WeChat to newer, more visually-oriented platforms such as RedNote and Douyin—Chinese women have discovered novel avenues for self-expression and grassroots mobilization (Women of China, 2023).

The internet not only facilitates rapid information dissemination but also nurtures online communities connected by shared interests or identities. The emergence of *online feminism* has catalyzed the diffusion of feminist perspectives addressing issues

such as workplace inequity, bodily autonomy, and social justice (Gu et al., 2024, p. 5322). As Yang observe, these digital spaces enable women to challenge traditional gender norms, share personal experiences, and amplify marginalized perspectives in ways previously impossible within China's public sphere (2023, p. 39).

Yaya (2023) points out that online platforms provide women with opportunities for self-expression, mutual support, and trans-regional connectivity. This phenomenon not only broadens the scope of discourse on women's issues but also facilitates the construction of new consensus-building spaces within social networks. Liu (2023) has documented how this “bottom-up” approach to advocacy can disrupt hierarchical power structures, offering women a platform to challenge traditional discourse dominance and redefine gender roles (pp. 318-319).

Nevertheless, navigating the Chinese digital environment entails significant constraints. Censorship mechanisms, platform regulations, and socio-political sensitivities frequently delineate the boundaries of feminist discourse (Chen & Zheng, 2024, p. 147; Zeng, 2021, p. 166; Zheng, 2021, p. 170). Specific examples include the suspension of accounts discussing gender inequality (Han, 2018, p. 743), and platform algorithmic suppression of content challenging traditional gender roles (Wang & Yuan, 2023, p. 521). Despite these impediments, online advocacy continues to flourish through creative circumvention strategies and coded language (Han & Liu, 2024, p. 1; Chang, 2025, p. 1).

Influencers—particularly those focused on women's empowerment—leverage their platforms to illuminate gender inequality, disseminate personal narratives of resilience, and foster community engagement. Consequently, the internet has emerged as a crucial medium for cultivating new forms of collective consciousness regarding women's rights and gender equality in contemporary China (The Paper, 2023).

2.1.3 Women's empowerment and its theoretical basis

At its foundation, empowerment constitutes a dynamic, multi-dimensional process through which individuals or marginalized groups gain agency over their lives by

challenging oppressive and inequitable power structures. It encompasses enhancing self-efficacy and acquiring power (Rowlands, 1995, pp. 102-103; Ding, 2009, p. 79). As Kabeer (2005) emphasizes, empowerment involves not merely access to resources but the capacity to make strategic choices previously denied due to structural constraints (p. 13).

Communication media substantially influences societal power configurations (Castells et al., 2009, pp. 193). The emergence of new media technologies has provided unprecedented mechanisms for individuals to access resources, exercise agency, and achieve empowerment (Dolničar & Fortunati, 2014, p. 166). Within the Chinese context, empowerment acquires distinctive characteristics shaped by cultural norms, regulatory frameworks, and rapidly evolving social media ecosystems. Digital platforms facilitate the sharing of individual experiences—such as challenging conventional gender roles, addressing workplace gender discrimination, or promoting life positivity especially to rural development in China (Zhou & Li, 2017, p. 252; Lu et al., 2023, p. 1; Wu, 2023, p. 96)—and transform these narratives into collective activism.

Female empowerment influencers in the Chinese digital ecosystem constitute a distinct hybrid category of social media actors who cannot be fully understood within the conventional frameworks of lifestyle or feminist influencers. Unlike lifestyle influencers, whose content primarily revolves around consumption, aesthetics, and aspirational self-presentation (Hasell & Chinn, 2023; Abidin, 2015), these influencers deliberately embed ideological advocacy and gender equality discourses within their digital personas. Simultaneously, they diverge from classical feminist activists by operating within—and adapting to—the highly regulated, commercially driven, and algorithmically mediated environment of Chinese social media platforms (Chen & Zheng, 2024; Zeng, 2021; Zheng, 2021). To answer RQ1, Female empowerment influencers in China represent a *hybrid form* of digital actor who combines *ideological messaging* with *aesthetic strategy*, adapts to political constraints, cultivates intimate online relationships, and expresses feminism in contextually grounded ways. They cannot be fully understood through existing models of either

commercial influencers or activist feminists, but instead embody a unique blend of visibility, strategy, and social commentary.

2.2 Construction of authority

2.2.1 Redefining authority in digital spaces

The rise of user-generated content has fragmented the media environment, enabling individuals to compete with traditional experts by drawing on personal experience and cultural capital, rather than institutional legitimacy, professional expertise, or formal credentials (Kristensen & From, 2015, p. 862–863). This conventional model emphasizes the acquisition of public trust through recognized qualifications and established societal roles. However, within contemporary digital and social media environments, this paradigm is undergoing a significant transformation.

As Koreman et al. (2023) argue, digital platforms have restructured the conditions under which authority is constructed (p. 736). Rather than depending on institutional endorsement, authority in digital contexts is increasingly derived from a performative and relational dynamic. Content creators cultivate digital authority through sustained performance in content production, interaction with audiences, and strategic information curation (Koreman et al., 2023, p. 739). This shift represents a move from static, institutional authority to a fluid and continuously negotiated process embedded in digital practices.

Moreover, social media has democratized expertise by allowing individuals without traditional credentials to gain recognition through consistent demonstrations of knowledge, aesthetic curation, and community engagement (Zhao and Bouvier, 2022, p. 3). Influencers and other lifestyle experts exemplify this new configuration of authority, emerging amidst widespread skepticism towards institutions and official experts (McQuarrie et al., 2013, p.136-137). This democratization of information—where diverse voices can circulate across decentralized networks—positions influencers as credible figures precisely because they present themselves as “real people” who foster intimacy and relational proximity (Jin et al., 2019, p. 568).

Through deliberate performances of authenticity and lifestyle alignment, influencers are able to assert epistemic authority. These strategies not only differentiate them in competitive digital markets but also reflect broader shifts in neoliberal subjectivity, where individuals bear the responsibility for constructing and commodifying their personal identities (Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 2-3). Influencer expertise thus becomes inseparable from proximity to localized concerns, aesthetic sensibilities, and lifestyle discourses shaped by cultural capital.

In this context, the authority of influencers is not merely an individual achievement, but a socio-cultural production rooted in taste, consumption, and performative authenticity. As such, understanding the dynamics of digital authority requires attending to how influencers strategically navigate credibility, authenticity, and audience engagement in the broader context of declining institutional trust and the rise of platform-mediated knowledge dissemination.

2.2.2 Multidimensional process of authority construction

The process of authority construction is dynamic and multifaceted. First, influencers need to demonstrate domain expertise and specialized knowledge in their content to provide theoretical support and empirical foundation for their perspectives (Nguyen et al., 2025, p. 224). Second, they enhance the credibility of their arguments by strategically referencing external authoritative resources such as academic research, government data, and reputable media reports (Ohanian, 1990, p. 41). For example, when addressing workplace gender inequality or bodily autonomy, female empowerment influencers frequently incorporate statistical evidence or policy documents to illustrate the pervasiveness and urgency of these issues. Finally, influencers gradually accumulate social influence and *social capital* through participation in public discourse, thereby further solidifying their authoritative positioning (Koreman et al., 2024, p. 739-740).

In this process, authority is not instantaneously achieved but is instead progressively developed and reinforced through consistent content production, regular

audience engagement, and strategic alignment with external markers of credibility. Within the Chinese digital ecosystem, however, this process takes on additional complexity due to the specific logics of platform governance and state censorship. Notably, terms such as “women’s rights” have been classified as among the most sensitive filtered keywords (Deibert, 2008, pp. 7). As a result, feminist advocates must navigate a precarious balance between advancing sociopolitical critique and ensuring their continued visibility and survival on state-regulated platforms (Han, 2018, p. 735).

2.3 Credibility and authenticity

In contemporary media environments saturated with competing information, credibility has become a critical form of capital that both individuals and organizations strive to establish and maintain (Jenkins et al., 2020, pp. 2–3). Pornpitakpan (2004) further suggested that audiences are more likely to be influenced by sources they perceive as credible (p. 266). This is particularly important to social media influencers, whose perceived credibility significantly affects consumers’ attitudes toward sponsored content, trust in brand messaging, and overall engagement (Lou & Yuan, 2019, p. 67). The classic source credibility model identifies three key dimensions that shape audience perceptions: expertise, trustworthiness, and attractiveness (Ohanian, 1990). While this model was originally developed in the context of mass media and celebrity endorsements, its relevance extends to the digital influencer economy, where credibility remains a central concern

In this context, authenticity emerges as a cornerstone of credibility building (Zhao and Bouvier, 2022, p. 3). Unlike traditional experts, whose authority is conferred by institutional affiliations or professional qualifications (Verboord, 2010, p. 625), influencers derive legitimacy through their perceived authenticity, audience engagement, and cultural capital (Kristensen & From, 2015, p. 862-863; Koreman et al., 2024, p. 738).

2.3.1 Authenticity and credibility formation in digital feminist spaces

Audrezet et al. (2020) argue that commercial saturation and information overload have generated audience skepticism regarding influencer authenticity (p. 559). Consequently, only through sincerely self-presentation and emotional resonance can influencers distinguish themselves within the competitive social media environment. Female empowerment influencers in particular leverage authenticity as a communicative and performative resource. This involves displaying aspects of their personal lives, expressing vulnerability, and aligning their lifestyle with the messages they promote.

The perceived openness of social platforms has further enabled these influencers to bypass traditional gatekeeping institutions. Through consistent content creation and direct audience interaction, they construct a form of credibility that is validated by followers rather than professional credentials (Khamis et al., 2017, p. 202; Abidin, 2016, p. 87). This democratization of visibility, however, also amplifies the pressure to continuously perform authenticity, rendering it both a strategic necessity and a contested terrain in feminist influencer culture (Banet-Weiser, 2012, Chapter 1).

2.3.2 Balancing self-branding and commercialization

Though authenticity is essential for upholding credibility, it is not without conflicts—especially when women empowerment influencers participate in commercial partnerships. As pointed out by Banet-Weiser (2012), the principles of branding infiltrate activist dialogue, blurring the line between empowerment and commercialization (p. 3-6). Influencers frequently partner with brands via sponsorships, product endorsements, and joint campaigns, potentially leading to doubts about their intentions and ideological coherence. This business involvement requires a meticulous balancing act. On one side, personal branding allows influencers to profit from their efforts and broaden their audience. Conversely, blatant commodification can jeopardize their activist credibility and distance them from their primary supporters. The challenge is especially prominent for feminist influencers,

who must uphold ideological consistency while managing the financial demands of social media markets.

Nonetheless, according to Manfredi et al. (2024, p. 80), the power of influencers continues to be unstable. It relies on the ongoing negotiation of legitimacy within a fluid media environment influenced by both audience views and platform algorithms. Therefore, comprehending the relationship among self-branding, commercialization, and activist positioning is vital for examining how female empowerment influencers maintain their credibility in neoliberal digital environments.

3 Methodology

Given the exploratory nature of the research questions and the need to understand both the structural features of influencer content and the subjective experiences of audiences, this study employs a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design. In the first phase, a quantitative content analysis was conducted on a sample of influencer videos to identify underlying thematic dimensions and to examine the correlations between content themes, narrative strategies, and authority-building approaches. In the second phase, qualitative semi-structured interviews were carried out to explore how audiences perceive the authority and credibility of female empowerment influencers. Insights from the initial quantitative findings informed the development of interview guideline, allowing for a more focused and nuanced understanding of how audience perceive content produced by female empowerment influencers.

3.1 Quantitative content analysis

To gain insights into the content produced by female empowerment influencers and to understand how they establish credibility and authority, I applied a quantitative content analysis of their video materials.

3.1.1 Data description

This study focuses on influencer video content from RedNote (also known as Xiaohongshu), one of China's most prominent lifestyle and social commerce platforms. First, its user base is overwhelmingly female (Yu, 2025, p. 327), and it has become a key site for discussions related to beauty, wellness, self-improvement, and increasingly, gender issues (Geng, 2024, pp. 28). This makes RedNote an ideal site to observe how influencers strategically construct feminist messaging within a commercially and politically constrained digital environment.

Due to the influence of platform algorithmic recommendations and censorship practices, many female empowerment influencers on RedNote tend to cluster around community-driven hashtags such as #girlsgrowth and #girlstalk. These tags serve as semi-coded discursive spaces where influencers can share content related to feminism and empowerment without triggering overt censorship. Therefore, sample selection began by searching these two hashtags within the platform. Influencers were included if they met the following criteria: (1) over 50,000 followers; (2) consistently posted at least one video related to female empowerment every two weeks in the past year; and (3) had accessible video content under the relevant hashtags. Based on these criteria, the first eleven influencers appearing under the platform's comprehensive ranking for two relevant hashtags were identified. From each influencer, the ten most recent relevant videos (in reverse chronological order) were selected for analysis. One influencer, *对话中的暂停*, had the largest follower count (1714k), so fifteen of her videos were included. In total, the final video sample consisted of 115 videos, numbered from #1-#115.

3.1.2 Coding operationalization

To analyze influencer content systematically, a coding scheme was developed based on prior literature on digital feminism, influencer culture, and credibility construction (see Appendix A). In addition to basic metadata (e.g., Video_URL, Influencer_ID, Publication_Date, Follower_count), each video was coded along four core analytical dimensions as video themes, narrative strategies, authority-building

approaches, and brand collaboration based on established literature in digital feminism, influencer culture, and credibility construction.

The thematic dimension captures the central feminist issues addressed in each video. Drawing on prior work on feminist media discourse (Gu et al., 2024, p. 5322; Yang, 2023, p. 39), six main themes were identified: gender equality, workplace rights, body autonomy, political participation, sexual relations, self-growth/girls' growth, which have been mentioned in more than 10 sample videos. The narrative strategy dimension reflects how influencers communicate their message, shaped by studies on self-branding, affective labor, and feminist authenticity (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 2-3). The following four narrative strategies were coded initially: personal storytelling, emotional appeal, data-driven argumentation, expert citation. During the coding process, I found two other strategies that were often mentioned, which are situational interpretation, and suggestion provision. The latter involves videos that present concrete advice or practical solutions to address specific challenges related to women's empowerment or their self-development. To assess how influencers gain authority, four markers were included, adapted from prior studies on digital expertise and micro-celebrity (Nguyen et al., 2025, p. 224; Ohanian, 1990, p. 41; Koreman et al., 2024; p. 739-740). These included: academic credentials (e.g., referencing degrees or institutional affiliations), professional qualifications (e.g., certificates or titles), work experience (e.g., references to one's career or industry), and social status indicators (e.g., luxury consumption, celebrity collaboration). All variables were coded as binary (1 = present; 0 = absent), based on whether each feature appeared in the video content (Appendix B). Although no formal pilot test was conducted prior to the full-scale coding, intercoder reliability was assessed after the formal coding. A second coder was invited to independently code a randomly selected subset of 11 videos (approximately 10% of the total sample) using the same codebook (see Appendix C). The results of reliability check showed a high level of agreement, with an overall average percent agreement of 95.7%. This level of consistency suggests that the variables were clearly defined and that the coding decisions were reliably replicable by other coders.

3.1.3 Data analysis

After importing coded data to SPSS, the first step involved applying Categorical Principal Component Analysis (CATPCA) to the six video themes. This dimensionality reduction technique was selected to identify latent constructs within the thematic variables, enabling a more parsimonious interpretation of influencers' content orientations. Unlike traditional PCA or factor analysis, CATPCA is suited to binary or nominal variables, making it appropriate for this dataset (Linting & van der Kooij, 2012, p.12). These thematic dimensions were then used as independent variables in bivariate correlation analyses, testing their correlations with specific narrative strategies and authority-building approaches. Additionally, bivariate correlations were calculated between variables representing narrative strategies and authority-building approaches to explore how they relate to one another. This sequence helps me to understand not just what messages are being communicated, but how particular types of feminist discourse relate to distinct styles of credibility and authority construction.

3.2 In-depth interviews

To complement the quantitative content analysis and further explore how audiences interpret and evaluate authority and perceive credibility of the female empowerment influencers, the second phase of this study involved qualitative, semi-structured interviews. The goal was to gain insight into users' perceptions of female empowerment influencers, their credibility strategies, and the factors shaping audience trust and engagement.

3.2.1 Data description

All interview participants should be active users of RedNote and regularly engage with content related to women's empowerment and feminist discourse. Additionally, each participant follows at least one influencer included in the video sample analyzed in the first phase of the study. Initially, six potential participants were contacted based

on their attention to women's empowerment content on RedNote. Of these, three individuals agreed to participate and had suitable availability for in-depth interviews. These three were purposively selected to maximize diversity in socio-cultural backgrounds, aiming to capture a broad range of lived experiences, digital media habits, and perspectives on feminist discourse. In the interest of confidentiality and readability, they are referred to by their preferred English names throughout the analysis. *Chloe* is currently living in the Netherlands as an international student; *Echo* recently returned to China after completing a master's degree in the United Kingdom; and *Adeng* has never lived abroad and currently works in a Chinese government institution. While the sample size is relatively small, it is considered appropriate for in-depth thematic analysis, which focus more on interpretive richness over representativeness.

Interviews were conducted between May 15 and May 16, 2025, via the Tencent Meeting. Each session lasted between 30 and 60 minutes. Participants were provided with a consent form before interview. All interviews were audio-recorded with permission and supplemented by notes taken during the conversation. The interviews followed a semi-structured format, allowing for both guided questioning and open-ended elaboration. The interview guideline was partially informed by the preliminary findings of the content analysis especially how users perceive different types of authority-building approaches and narrative strategies (Appendix D).

3.2.2 Thematic analysis

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. First, all interview recordings were transcribed verbatim and cross-checked for accuracy. I then familiarized myself with the transcripts by reading and re-reading the material with my notes. Initial codes were generated inductively, focusing on participants' expressions of trust, impressions of influencer credibility, and their reactions to specific content. In the next stage, the initial codes were collated into candidate themes by identifying conceptual similarities

and tensions. Although I didn't use any software, the coding and theme development were guided by a structured memoing process. The final themes were selected based on frequency across participants, thematic depth, and relevance to the research questions. Quotes were translated into English for inclusion in Chapter 4, preserving original tone and meaning.

4 Results

This chapter presents the empirical findings in the order of the research design. It first outlines the results of the quantitative content analysis, including dimensional reduction through CATPCA and correlation analyses, which respond to RQ2. The chapter then presents the results of thematic analysis of three interviews, which addresses RQ3 regarding how audience perceive the authority and credibility of female empowerment influencers and what factors shape their trust and engagement.

4.1 Underlying structure of video content themes

CATPCA (Table 1) extracted two dimensions with eigenvalues exceeding 1, collectively accounting for 53.408% of the total variance (Appendix E, Model Summary Rotation). Dimension 1 (Eigenvalue = 1.806) explained 30.107% of the variance and had a Cronbach's alpha of 0.536, indicating relatively poor internal consistency. Dimension 2 accounted for 23.301% of the variance (Eigenvalue = 1.411) with a lower reliability coefficient ($\alpha = 0.342$). Despite this, the overall model reliability was high, with a total Cronbach's alpha of 0.826.

Table 1. CATPCA Rotated component matrix ($N=115$)

	Dimension	
	1	2
Downplay Gender Equality	.839	-.067
Encourage Workplace Rights	-.029	.425
Advocate Political Participation	-.088	.782
Promote Girls Growth	.854	-.130
Downplay Body Autonomy	.500	.616
Downplay Sex Relations	-.307	.472

The first principal component identified through CATPCA (Table 1) is characterized by high positive loadings on Downplay Gender Equality (.839) and Promote Girls' Growth (.854). Gender Equality is reverse-coded, such that higher scores indicate content where structural critiques of institutionalized sexism are downplayed or absent. *Girls' Growth* refers to a specific content orientation prevalent on RedNote, in which influencers critique or subvert dominant ideals of feminine self-improvement. The term reflects a redefinition of what it means for girls to grow, shifting from conforming to societal expectations to developing critical awareness and autonomy. A lot of the girls' growth content on the platform centers on themes of self-discipline, emotional regulation, aesthetic enhancement, and productivity (Lin & Mao, 2024, p. 60). For example, in video #6, the influencer provides a structured method for managing social discomfort specifically targeted at young women, enabling them to navigate traditionally social settings with greater ease and confidence. The video implicitly acknowledges the pressures of the male gaze and social judgment, while offering techniques for emotional self-regulation that align with dominant discourses of feminine composure and adaptability.

These two variables clustered into a thematic dimension consistent with postfeminist sensibility (Riley et al., 2017, p.1), reflecting a model of empowerment that emphasizes personal transformation and emotional resilience while depoliticizing feminist critique. The content associated with this dimension tends to foreground lived experience, emotional authenticity, and embodied identity. This thematic orientation resonates with the notion of *performance of authenticity* (Banet-Weiser, 2021, p. 12-16; Hearn and Schoenhoff, 2015, pp. 194), where female influencers strategically foreground vulnerability and self-expression to establish legitimacy. As Turner (2010) argued, this echoes the broader *demotic turn* in media, where ordinary people become visible by *playing themselves*. The emotional and subjective quality of these videos also reflects what Kabeer (2005) describes as internal empowerment—the reclamation of self-perception and agency under gendered constraints. Given its emphasis on experience-driven empowerment and affective communication, this dimension is labeled Embodied Feminist Expression.

The second component is defined by strong loadings on advocating Political Participation (.782), and Workplace Rights (.425), but downplaying Body Autonomy (.616) and Sexual Relations (.472). These themes signal a discourse that extends beyond the personal into the political, foregrounding women’s collective struggles and structural critiques. For example, video #54 critiques gendered power imbalances in both workplace and media contexts. The influencer argues that female professionals face real threats to their authority and safety when objectified—unlike men, whose sexualization rarely affects their social power. The video exemplifies an institutional feminist discourse that challenges structural inequalities rather than focusing solely on individual empowerment. The orientation of this dimension aligns with what scholars describe as institutional feminist discourse—where empowerment is articulated through calls for legal reform, bodily sovereignty, and engagement with public policy or sociopolitical structures (Rowlands, 1995, p.102; Liu, 2023, p.318). As Kristensen and From (2015) argued that digital authority may shift from institutional to relational forms, but in politically constrained environments, some influencers still draw on institutional tropes to legitimize their critique. Videos in this dimension focus not merely on expressing emotion or narrating lived experience, but on asserting claims to public space, citizenship, and institutional accountability.

Table 2. Two dimensions of female empowerment influencer’s’ video content

Dimensions	Contains the subject number (variable)	Dimension names
Dimension 1	Downplay Gender Equality, Promote Girls' Growth	Embodied Feminist Expression
Dimension 2	Advocate Political Participation, Downplay Body Autonomy, Downplay Sex Relations, Encourage Workplace Rights	Institutional Feminist Discourse

While CATPCA extracted two statistically distinguishable thematic dimensions—Embodied Feminist Expression and Institutional Feminist Discourse (see Table 2)—these should not be interpreted as strictly oppositional or mutually exclusive systems. Empirical evidence from the sampled data shows that in each influencer’s collected

videos, elements from both dimensions were present. None of the influencer content instances could be exclusively assigned to one single dimension. This suggests that the two dimensions are not clearly demarcated in actual content production but rather constitute a flexible repertoire of discourse resources.

4.2 Correlation between theme, narrative strategy, and authority-building approach

Correlation analysis reveals different associations between the two thematic dimensions—Embodied Feminist Expression and Institutional Feminist Discourse—and the narrative and authority-building strategies employed by influencers (see Table 3). These patterns reflect distinct rhetorical and ideological orientations within feminist influencer discourse, which align with broader theoretical debates about authenticity, expertise, and gendered performance in digital culture.

Table 3. Correlations between thematic dimensions, narrative strategies, and authority-building approaches ($N=115$)

		Embodied feminist expression	Institutional feminist discourse
Narrative strategy	Personal	.172	-.089
	Storytelling		
	Data Driven	-.251**	.141
	Arguments		
	Expert Citations	-.170	-.157
	Emotional	.071	-.069
	Appeals		
	Situational	-.151	-.050
	Interpretation		
	Suggestion Provided	.428***	.001
Authority-building approaches	Academic	.189*	.149
	Credentials		
	Professional	.118	.260**
	Qualification		
	Mentioned		
	Work Experience	.217*	.268**
	Referenced		
Social Status Indicators	.136	.070	

Notes: Values represent Pearson correlation coefficients. Significance: *** $p < .001$ ** $p < .01$ * $p < .05$

Embodied Feminist Expression reflects a discourse centered on personal growth, emotional resonance, and experiential authority. As indicated by the significant positive correlation with providing suggestions ($r = .428, p < .001$), this dimension prioritizes interpersonal engagement and practical guidance. Influencers associated with this discourse often utilize personal storytelling ($r = .172, p \approx 0.5$), references to work experience ($r = .217$) and academic credentials ($r = .189$), to build credibility through individualized, relatable forms of knowledge. These patterns resonate with Abidin's (2016) and Khamis et al.'s (2017) observations that influencer authority often emerges from sustained, authentic self-presentation rather than institutional alignment.

Institutional Feminist Discourse is significantly positively associated with references to work experience ($r = .268, p < .01$) and professional qualifications (r

= .260, $p < .01$), suggesting that influencers aligned with this discourse often rely on formalized expertise to establish credibility. Although not statistically significant, this dimension exhibits negative or near-zero correlations with most other measured variables, including personal storytelling ($r = -.089$), emotional appeals ($r = -.069$), and situational interpretation ($r = -.050$). It is also virtually uncorrelated with suggestion-giving ($r = .001$), suggesting a more impersonal and issue-centered mode of discourse. This aligns with a more institutional mode of feminist communication, where authority derives from formal expertise and alignment with systemic critique, rather than interpersonal connection or narrative vulnerability.

Beyond these thematic associations, correlations among narrative and authority strategies themselves (see Appendix E, Correlations 3) provide insight into how rhetorical repertoires are configured in influencer discourse. Personal storytelling, for instance, is significantly negatively correlated with both data-driven arguments ($r = -.217$, $p = .020$) and expert citations ($r = -.298$, $p = .002$), reinforcing the dichotomy between experiential and rational authority. It is also negatively related to situational interpretation ($r = -.353$, $p < .001$), a strategy that influencers interpret the content of their videos from a third-person perspective. These results suggest that influencers who foreground personal stories are less likely to appeal to abstract systems or formalized knowledge sources. However, personal storytelling is positively associated with academic credentials ($r = .216$, $p = .020$) and work experience ($r = .198$, $p = .034$), revealing a nuanced hybrid dynamic: influencers may leverage personal narratives while selectively signaling professional credibility. This supports Duffy and Hund's (2015) observation that women's self-branding often involves *curated personal sharing*, wherein emotional authenticity is enhanced through controlled visibility of expertise (p.7).

Moreover, expert citations and data-driven arguments are strongly positively correlated with each other ($r = .355$, $p < .001$), underscoring their shared alignment with rational, institutional forms of authority. These strategies appear largely independent from more emotionally driven techniques. A small but significant negative correlation between expert citations and social status indicators ($r = -.189$, p

= .043) further suggests that influencers who adopt epistemic authority tend to downplay performative displays of prestige or celebrity-like cues—perhaps as a strategy to avoid being perceived as too commercialized or self-aggrandizing. This distinction reflects the tension between authenticity and self-promotion in platform cultures, particularly for female influencers, whose performances of credibility are often scrutinized through both patriarchal ideological and aesthetic lenses (Banet-Weiser, 2021, p. 13; Duffy & Hund, 2015, p. 8).

4.3 Multiple dimensions of authority and credibility construction

To complement the video content analysis and gain deeper insight into how audiences perceive the work of female empowerment influencers, the next section shifts to a thematic analysis of in-depth interviews.

Theme 1: Practical usefulness as the primary trust base

A dominant theme across all three interviews was that trust in female empowerment influencers is grounded less in their formal credentials or narrative strategies, and more in whether their content is perceived as practically useful and applicable to the audiences' own life. All three interviewees described using RedNote not just as a social platform but as a *search engine* for navigating everyday dilemmas—from professional advice to emotional struggles. As Echo noted, “In addition to using RedNote to kill time... If I want to find specific content, I will directly click on the Search and use it as search engine.”

This shift from *searching for answers* to *searching for experience* reflects a broader epistemological transition. Unlike traditional search engines such as Baidu, which operate through top-down information hierarchies and keyword matching, RedNote enables what recent Zou (2025, p. 538) describes as 经验众包 (crowdsourcing of experience) and 弱关系链嵌入 (weak-tie relational embedding). That is, users are not merely seeking definitive information but validating their lived uncertainties by engaging with loosely affiliated others who have experienced similar

situations. Adeng also expressed this orientation clearly: “I will trust a (female empowerment) influencer more when what she says is practical, not just empty theories or academic qualifications... but something that can actually help you do something.”

These remarks confirm a *de-hierarchization of authority*, where traditional top-down expertise is displaced by context-sensitive, experience-based knowledge embedded within relational networks. In the case of RedNote, this form of mediated peer knowledge is not only more emotionally resonant but also perceived as more trustworthy because authority established through shared circumstance rather than credentials. In this context, credibility is not bestowed by institutions, but co-produced through accessible, trial-and-error discourse shaped by everyday users.

Theme 2 Skepticism toward affective authenticity

Contrary to dominant narratives on influencer credibility, participants in this study expressed notable skepticism toward the role of emotional disclosure and affective storytelling in establishing trust. Rather than perceiving emotional authenticity as a marker of credibility, they tended to view excessive emotional expression—particularly when highly individualized or dramatized—as potentially manipulative or performative, thereby undermining an influencer’s perceived authority. Adeng said that when influencers share too many emotional narratives, she begins to question their intentions.

Similarly, Chloe described that even when the content is solid, an overemphasis on emotion leads her to question the influencer’s professionalism. While Echo did not explicitly say that emotional disclosure would affect her credibility with influencers, she did mention that she would avoid consuming content if it was too emotional.

These reactions complicate the notion that authenticity—particularly emotional or affective authenticity—is universally valued in digital feminist spaces. While existing scholarship argues that vulnerability and emotional openness are often mobilized as trust-building mechanisms (Banet-Weiser, 2021, p. 17), participants in this study were acutely aware that such disclosures may be strategically employed. Their assessments

were not based on the mere presence of affect but on its perceived function and proportionality.

These findings suggest that performances of authenticity—especially among female influencers—are always under surveillance, not only from institutional or algorithmic systems but also from the audience itself. In line with Banet-Weiser’s work on the gendered labor of authenticity, participants implicitly acknowledged that while emotional storytelling is expected of female influencers, it must also be carefully managed (2012). Too much vulnerability can lead to perceived irrationality; too little may appear cold or detached. This reveals a paradox in audience expectations: influencers are asked to be “real,” but that realness must be measured, controlled, and purposefully integrated into the content.

Theme 3 Redefining professional authority in content-centric terms

Participants across interviews consistently indicated that while they were aware of influencers stated credentials—such as academic degrees, certificates, or work experience—these markers were not decisive in shaping their trust. Instead, they emphasized the importance of how knowledge was expressed in the content itself: the clarity of reasoning, the structure of argument, and the perceived coherence between topic and delivery. In this view, credibility was not derived from institutional indicators, but from a content-centric evaluation of professionalism and competence.

These perceptions reflect a broader erosion of institutional legitimacy in platform cultures, particularly in the context of commercialized influencer branding. As Chloe noted,

“Everyone is packaging themselves to look good on social media...To me, it is not very convincing. Maybe it is because many laymen do not know which certificates are worth getting... Some certificates are worthless, and some certificates are obtained without any effort.”

This distrust is consistent with what Audrezet et al. (2021, p. 559) describe as the crisis of trust due to commercial saturation and information overload: credentials are

performatively displayed but are often met with critical scrutiny by an audience increasingly attuned to the artificiality of online self-branding.

Instead of relying on traditional markers, participants emphasized content-based criteria when assessing professional authority. These included: logical structure, clarity of thought, topic-knowledge alignment, and the ability to make abstract ideas intelligible. These findings suggest a shift from institutional to performative epistemology—what we might term “content-performance professionalism.” Influencers are judged not on what they have achieved on paper, but on how they embody professionalism in the act of content production itself.

Echo has clearer expectations of the authority-building of female empowerment influencers. She expressed that she tends to trust female empowerment influencers more when they are simultaneously recognized for expertise in another, more established knowledge domain. This comment suggests that gender discourse, on its own, may not be seen as requiring high epistemic specialization in the eyes of some audience members. Instead, it becomes credible when delivered by someone who has proven their value elsewhere. Such cross-domain authority signals allow audiences to transfer existing trust from one area (e.g., science, law) to another (e.g., feminism), especially when the influencer successfully bridges the two fields. As Echo noted: “If she’s smart and clear in one domain, I feel I can trust her judgment in another.” Therefore, for female empowerment influencers, credibility is transferable, where the authority of an online persona is not confined to a single topic but accrues across domains through repeated demonstration of competence and coherence. It also reflects a gendered expectation or pressure that female influencers, to be persuasive in politicized or controversial arenas like feminism, must first demonstrate value in spaces with higher traditional legitimacy and authority.

Theme 4 Conditional acceptance of commercial promotion

All participants acknowledged that commercial sponsorships are an inevitable aspect of being a social media influencer. However, they also articulated clear expectations regarding how such promotional content should be integrated into videos by female

empowerment influencers. Rather than categorically rejecting commercial collaboration, participants emphasized a set of moral, stylistic, and procedural boundaries that distinguish acceptable advertising from practices perceived as disingenuous or intrusive.

First, participants made clear distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable ad formats. Echo expressed a strong preference for overtly labeled explicit advertising:

“I don't accept that you are advertising specifically for this video... I can accept that they release a dedicated post that clearly promotes a product—just say it's an ad and I can choose to skip it... I don't accept fake people doing fake advertising. It's annoying.”

For her, transparency and separation were key: blending brand messaging into empowerment discourse without acknowledgment undermined trust. Chloe, in contrast, was more accepting of embedded ads, but only if “they don't advertise the entire video”.

Advertising frequency and the ratio of promotional to organic content strongly also shaped participants' perceptions. Adeng described:

“If I look at five contents of one influencer's recent videos and four of them are ads, I immediately suspect she's intention (to become a female empowerment influencer) ... But if only one is sponsored, it feels fine for me.”

Chloe echoed this with a *trust buffer logic*: “If I like this influencer, I'll tolerate occasional ads—even enjoy them if they're well integrated. But if I'm still getting to know her and see too many promotions, I might think: what is she doing?” These comments suggest that commercial fatigue is not about isolated ads, but about perceived saturation and imbalance between content, commerce even level of affinity for the influencer.

All three participants emphasized that influencers—especially those associated with feminist advocacy—have a responsibility to review the brands they collaborate with. Echo put it bluntly, for her, a female empowerment influencer cannot promote a brand that's been in sexist scandals. Participants expected influencers to conduct basic

due diligence, such as avoiding controversial products or companies with reputational issues related to gender. Moreover, even the presentation of the product had to pass a reliability check. As Echo recalled:

“There was this influencer who claimed to use a skincare product for 31 days—but the background in every video was exactly the same. It was clearly staged, and I stopped trusting her completely.”

While commercial partnerships are accepted as a financial necessity, they are only deemed legitimate when accompanied by ethical selectivity, proportional exposure, and transparency of intent. As Banet-Weiser (2012) argues, the merging of commodity culture and feminist discourse often blurs the line between activism and branding. What participants in this study demand, however, is a coherent alignment between the influencer’s advocacy values and their market behaviors.

Theme 5 Platform perception and algorithm awareness

A final theme that surfaced in the interviews concerns how participants perceive RedNote itself—including its algorithmic recommendation system, content logic, and broader platform identity. While much of the existing literature positions social media as a democratized space for feminist discourse, the participants in this study framed RedNote primarily as an entertainment and lifestyle platform—one that is algorithmically curated, light in tone, and not particularly conducive to sustained engagement with political or activist content.

All three participants acknowledged that much of what they see on the platform is driven by algorithmic suggestions. Chloe noted:

“Most of the new content I come across is algorithmically recommended to me...I still think that when I surf the Internet, whether I watch long videos or short videos, I know clearly what my purpose is, which is to relax.”

She also emphasized that while she follows some accounts for knowledge and empowerment content, her primary use of the platform is for relaxation. Adeng echoed this sentiment, stating that she mostly follows entertainment content. These remarks reflect a tension between the perceived function of RedNote as a feminist

activist online space (Lian et al. 2021, p. 191) and its dominant logic as a platform of casual, bite-sized, and visually engaging content. Participants did not dispute the presence of valuable feminist or educational material but rather pointed out that such content is often embedded within, or obscured by, the platform's overall entertainment-driven algorithm. As a result, more serious or complex content may struggle to gain traction or sustained attention, especially when competing with visually aesthetic, emotionally gratifying, or humor-oriented posts.

Moreover, reliance on RedNote's *recommendation section* implies a passive mode of engagement, where empowering messages are consumed incidentally rather than deliberately, depending largely on what the platform "thinks" users want to see (Gillespie, 2014, pp. 190). In the case of RedNote, the dominance of lifestyle and aspirational content may determine how feminist messages are constructed, received, and disseminated.

Participants' platform consciousness lowered their expectations of the role that empowering content could play on RedNote. While they acknowledged that the platform had a role in providing practical knowledge or everyday feminist advice, they also viewed it primarily as a social and entertainment tool. This shaped how they interpreted the authority of influencers and the broader visibility of feminist discourse: not as part of a formal or ideological movement, but as accidental, semi-accidental exposure embedded in an entertainment-first media ecology.

5 Conclusion and discussion

This study set out to explore how female empowerment influencers in the Chinese digital context construct and sustain their authority and credibility, and how audiences interpret and evaluate these performances. Regarding RQ1, the findings reveal that these influencers cannot be fully understood through conventional frames of lifestyle or feminist influencers in the context of China. They represent a hybrid category that strategically navigates feminist ideological advocacy, aesthetic curation, and platform constraints. In response to RQ2, I identify two dominant discursive orientations—

Embodied Feminist Expression and Institutional Feminist Discourse—each associated with distinct combinations of narrative strategies and authority-building approaches. While the former emphasizes personal storytelling and individualized knowledge, the latter relies on formalized expertise. Finally, interviews indicate that credibility is not granted based on emotional authenticity or institutional credentials alone. Instead, audiences place higher value on the practical usefulness of content, its coherence, and alignment with broader knowledge domains. Emotional expressiveness is viewed with caution, especially when perceived as excessive or manipulative, and commercial content is tolerated only within clearly defined ethical and stylistic boundaries. These findings highlight a complex, context-dependent negotiation of trust between influencers and their followers.

The employment of a mixed-method approach helps me to investigate the dynamics of feminist influencer culture in the Chinese digital context. The content analysis provided a systematic overview of how influencers construct credibility through specific narrative and authority-building choices, offering a foundation for identifying discursive patterns. While the interviews did not explicitly reproduce these categories, they provided crucial insight into how audiences interpret and evaluate such strategies. Audience tended to value content that was practically useful, logically consistent, and stylistically coherent as credible. They also expressed skepticism toward excessive emotional expression and a conditional acceptance of commercial content, suggesting that authority is assessed not by any single discursive element but through an implicit framework of ethical consistency and epistemic alignment. In this way, the combination of content analysis and interviews enables the understanding of how credibility is both discursively produced and socially negotiated within the constrained but dynamic media ecology on RedNote.

The findings of this study contribute to theoretical debates on authenticity, authority, and commercialization within digital feminist cultures. In relation to authenticity, existing studies emphasize emotional self-disclosure as a central strategy for establishing credibility, particularly among female influencers (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Duffy & Hund, 2015). However, this research complicates such assumptions by

demonstrating that affective storytelling is not uniformly valued. Interview participants exhibited a critical stance toward emotional excess, suggesting that authenticity is not judged by emotional visibility alone, but by its perceived proportionality and contextual integration. In this way, the research complements the concept of *authenticity labor* (Banet-Weiser, 2021, p. 144) by illustrating how emotional disclosure can undermine rather than enhance trust if interpreted as manipulative or performative. Second, the study extends the discussions on the transformation of digital authority by highlighting that influencers establish trust through their capacity to deliver content that is thematically coherent, stylistically clear, and personally resonant. This aligns with broader shifts observed in digital criticism, where affectively charged and subjective modes of expression—often written in the first person—invite audiences into a horizontal, rather than hierarchical, relationship with the content creator (Kristensen & From, 2015; Koreman et al., 2023). Much like contemporary amateur reviewers who blend personal narrative with analytical clarity, female empowerment influencers are trusted, to a large extent, not for their institutional capital, but for their perceived ability to translate complex issues into accessible, contextually grounded content. This reconfiguration of authority is further reflected in the platform practices observed in the Chinese digital context, where RedNote is increasingly used as a search engine. This shift highlights the infrastructural role of platforms in shaping the ways users assign epistemic authority, suggesting that influencer legitimacy may be increasingly tied to searchability, thematic expertise, and the perceived utility of their content. Third, this research adds complexity to debates around branded feminism (Banet-Weiser, 2012; Audrezet et al., 2020), revealing that audiences are not merely passive consumers of commercialized advocacy. Instead, they actively monitor the ideological integrity of influencers' market behaviors. Commercial content is conditionally accepted, but only when advertising is transparent, limited in frequency, and consistent with the influencer's feminist positioning.

While this study provides meaningful insights into the female empowerment influencers' practice in China, several limitations must be acknowledged. The

statistical correlations were not consistently significant, which may be attributed to the limited sample size. Besides, not all coded variables were designed to measure the same underlying construct; rather, they represent distinct analytical categories such as theme, narrative strategy, and authority-building approaches. As a result, variation in their explanatory relevance is to be expected. In the meanwhile, the coding scheme was deliberately non-exclusive, allowing each video to be tagged with multiple co-occurring themes or strategies. While this approach layered nature of influencer discourse, it also introduces analytical complexity. In particular, multi-label may exacerbate multicollinearity in dimensionality reduction techniques, thereby limiting the interpretability of extracted components and attenuating the clarity of subsequent correlation analyses (Li et al., 2023). For the in-depth interview, the small sample size of interview participants ($n = 3$) restricts the generalizability of the qualitative findings. In the meanwhile, the only focus on RedNote means the findings may not be transferable to other social media environments such as Weibo or Douyin, which have distinct content logics, user demographics, and regulatory mechanisms.

Future research could adopt a comparative lens to explore how gender, sexual identity, or political positioning influence the formation of digital authority across different social platforms. Longitudinal designs could further investigate how influencer credibility evolves over time, particularly in response to platform algorithm shifts, socio-political developments, or public controversies. Finally, incorporating additional methods such as digital ethnography or comment analysis could enrich our understanding of how authority and trust are co-constructed through real-time interaction and the affordances of specific media environments. These directions would not only refine the methodological toolkit for studying digital credibility but also contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of feminist communication within dynamic and politically constrained media ecologies. Despite these limitations, the study provides a valuable empirical significance by offering insights into how feminist influencers can more effectively establish trust—not only through narrative strategies or authority-building techniques, but also by aligning with audience expectations and socio-cultural norms.

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Appendixes

Appendix A Codebook for influencer content analysis

See *Appendixes.zip*, Appendix A for the full codebook

Appendix B Video content analysis coded database
See *Appendixes.zip*, Appendix B for the full database

Appendix C Coding reliability testing

See *Appendixes.zip*, Appendix C for the full file

To check the reliability, I randomly selected 10 videos from my dataset of 115 videos conducted by a second coder. The second coder applied the same codebook as I did to independently code these videos. Discrepancies between the second coder's and my coding are highlighted in blue in the document. Overall, the intercoder agreement rate was 95.7%, indicating a high level of coding consistency and clarity of the coding scheme.

Appendix D Interview guidelines

Audience perceptions of credibility and engagement in female empowerment influencer content

Participant Criteria:

Active users of RedNote/Xiaohongshu who follow or engage with female empowerment content and follow at least one of the influencers in my dataset.

1. General Platform Engagement

1.1 Can you describe your general usage of RedNote?

How often do you use the platform?

What kinds of content do you typically engage with?

1.2 Do you follow any influencers who focus on women's empowerment or gender-related topics? If so, could you name a few or describe them?

2. Credibility and Authority

2.1. What makes you perceive an influencer as credible?

Are there specific characteristics or behaviors you look for?

2.2 How important are elements like professional background, academic credentials, or work experience when you assess their authority?

2.3 Do emotional or personal stories make you more or less likely to trust an influencer? Why?

3. Engagement and Resonance

3.1 Can you recall a specific post or video from an empowerment influencer that resonated with you?

What was it about? Why did it stand out?

3.2 What kind of content are you most likely to like, comment on, or share?

Do certain topics (e.g., workplace rights, body autonomy) affect your likelihood to engage?

3.3 How does the tone or style (e.g., emotional, data-driven, practical) of a post influence your response?

4. Responses to Promotional or Commercial Content

4.1 Have you ever seen a female empowerment influencer promote a product or brand?

What was your reaction to that content?

4.2 Do commercial collaborations affect your perception of their trustworthiness or authenticity?

In what ways?

4.3 Is there a difference, in your view, between being a feminist influencer and being a commercial influencer? Where do you draw the line?

5. Influence on Beliefs and Actions

5.1 Have any influencers ever changed the way you think about gender issues, feminism, or your own life choices?

Can you provide an example?

5.2 Do you see yourself as part of a broader feminist or empowerment community online? Why or why not?

Final Question

Is there anything else you would like to share about how you relate to empowerment content or influencers on RedNote?

Appendix E CATPCA & correlation analysis output
See *Appendixes.zip*, Appendix E for the full file

Appendix F Interview consent form
See *Appendixes.zip*, Appendix F for the full file

Appendix G Transcripts of interviews (in Chinese)
See *Appendixes.zip*, Appendix G for the full file